DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 441 893 UD 033 559

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TITLE	"Don't Do's": Strategies for Teachers.
PUB DATE	2000-04-24
NOTE	30p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000). Extracted from an unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, entitled, "It Just Couldn't Have Been Our School: A Phenomenological Study of the Schooling Experiences of African American Male Inmates."
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Black Students; *Educational Environment; *Males; *Prisoners; Racial Bias; Secondary Education; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Expectations of Students; *Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	*African Americans; Caring

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the schooling experiences of nine African American male inmates. The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with inmates to obtain accounts of their schooling experiences, then grouped recurring topics into four themes. The themes included: their discomfort with being embarrassed or shamed in school; their feeling of being on the outside looking in; their need to feel cared about by teachers; and the fear they noticed others felt for them and that which they felt for others. The paper concludes with a list of things that teachers must never do, including: never forget that voice is important; never maintain low expectations; never purposely embarrass students; never exclude students from decision-making opportunities; never forget students' tendency to feel like outsiders; never show impatience; never socially promote because of disciplinary problems; never forget to help students set goals; never allow sleeping in class; and never forget that the school belongs to the students. (Contains 36 references.) (SM)

"Don't Do's:" Strategies for Teachers

Paper Extracted From:

It Just Couldn't Have Been Our School: A Phenomenological Study of the Schooling Experiences of African American Male Inmates. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. The University of Minnesota.

April 24, 2000

Presented At The

American Educational Research Association
Annual Conference
New Orleans, LA

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"Don't Do's:" Strategies for Teachers

Paper Extracted From:

It Just Couldn't Have Been Our School: A Phenomenological Study of the Schooling Experiences of African American Male Inmates

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Introduction

This paper is extracted from the author's doctoral dissertation that explored the schooling experiences of nine African American male inmates. A main point for teachers to remember from this research is that a child's feeling ownership in a school increases motivation and decreases negative and aggressive behaviors (Goodenow, 1993; Taylor, 1993). Courses and seminars concentrating on communication skills for educators, conflict resolution and school discipline programs are a necessary component of America's public school systems. But, we have largely overlooked one important aspect: understanding lived school experiences of students. Educators and administrators must increase their awareness of lived school experiences that contribute to students' feeling as though the school they attend is not their school. Valuing lived school experiences is fundamental to helping students feel that the school they attend is indeed "their school."

This dissertation study was completed in 1998. While phenomenological research does not pose recommendations for practice, one comment in particular inspired this paper. An African American male professor in his written comments wrote:

> I realize that the author's intent was to document the school experiences of the inmates, however, readers frequently expect or anticipate "solutions." Although I do not believe that is the author's obligation, it would be helpful to provide five to seven strategies that teachers could take away as they try to meet the needs of African American males . . . I find in my courses that teachers are constantly in pursuit of helpful hints, strategies, books, or articles that address effective ways of meeting the needs of African American males. . . By hearing first-hand accounts of African American male inmates shoring what "went wrong" during their schooling experiences, this information can serve as valuable "don't do's" for many teachers (April 9, 1999).

Terrell, S. (1998). It just couldn't have been our school: A phenomenological study of the schooling experiences of African American male inmates. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. The University of Minnesota.

In as much as the main goal of educators is to provide the best educational experiences for all students, the previous comments are accepted as vital to the achievement of this goal. Listening is the key to understanding their experiences. But, listening means listening intently to the voices of coinvestigators (participants). In their own voices, I heard African American men take responsibility for their actions. I heard them share experiences they had in school and in society more broadly; many of the experiences reflected uncaring treatment and discrimination. Yet, few of them complained about how others treated them. I noticed their efforts to refrain from the "blame the man" mentality we often associate with inmates. I saw them attempt to maintain a strong way-of-being when they actually wanted to cry. One did shed tears and others' eyes filled with tears as they spoke. Their tears were unnecessary for me to empathize with their pain. Physiological changes such as a lowering of the heard, looking away while focusing on nothing, or voice changes indicated to me their embarrassment, shame and hurt. We can learn from their voices if we are willing. We may learn to be more caring in the process. Learning to listen to their voices and learning to care is the essence of the research and speaks to the significance of the study.

Relevance and Significance of the Study

The aim of phenomenological research is to bring forth an awareness of the vast array of lived experiences and to look for new possibilities (Hultgren, 1989). The participant's voice in their vernacular is instrumental in providing the awareness. As a result, professionals who want to help can be more focused and attentive to others who have similar experiences (Hutgren, 1989). Hopefully, this study can bring forth new awareness of how African American male inmates experience school. Perhaps I and others can become more sensitive to African American males in school. In addition, maybe public policy can be informed and even amended, so that we become more responsive to distinct situations (Polkinghorne, 1989) regarding the education of African American males. The following comments were presented to the author regarding the importance of this study.

> The most that I like about this text is the infusion of a theory of caring and a holistic approach to understanding the lived worlds of a group of African American males. While the subjects are a specific population of black males, inmates, I believe that those of us in institutions who deliver services for black men will benefit from this study. . . . It was refreshing for me to read about an argument for research to focus on the holistic. I have not

read an author who has taken a theory of caring and situate it within the world of the penal institutions, regarding black men. (4/16/99)

The topic is extremely relevant given the persistent underachievement of African American males in U.S. schools. I like the qualitative data from the participants about the critical aspects of their schooling process that they feel ostracized them. In addition, the author does a nice job of providing a historical context in which she writes the story of the co-investigators. I think the historical approach helps to shed light on conditions that have contributed to the images and negative perceptions that society has created on African American males. The author also provides sound statistical information to highlight why the need of such a study is warranted. (4/16/99)

The topic is extremely significant. The current data on African American males in higher education and in correctional systems in the U.S. underscores the significance. In addition, given the disproportionate number of African American males in special education classrooms in this county indicate that there is a need for African American male perspectives of their schooling experiences to be heard. It is becoming grossly apparent that their educational, social, and emotional needs are not being met in many schools. This work can go a long way in shedding much needed insight into a marginalized student body. (4/9/99)

Overview

This phenomenological study examines the educational experiences of a segment of Americans that face distinctive problems in school and society: African American males. These boys and men face nearly overwhelming odds against living a full, meaningful, and long life. The barriers and pitfalls African American males face are reflected in their over representation in troubling categories. A disproportionately high number of them experience infant mortality, special education, illiteracy, poverty, school suspensions, school dropout, juvenile and adult arrest, homicide, incarceration and unemployment. African American males are less likely to thrive in school than their European American counterparts. Conversely, they are more likely to be incarcerated.

Examining the educational experiences of African American male inmates is complex because of the multifaceted issues rooted in the history of individuals with African ancestry living in America. The commitment for carrying out this study was encouraged by the work of DuBois (1940) and Hill (1993). They postulated that conducting credible research on African Americans

without examining their experiences holistically is impossible. By holistic, I mean combined experiences as opposed to examining only a single experience or a single variable.

Looking at both external and internal factors can help us appreciate more fully the complexity of African American males' lives. According to Hill (1993), the major external forces affecting African Americans are (1) "social stratification -- race, class, and sector, (2) racism -- individual and institutional, (3) sexism, (4) birth rates, (5) sex ratios (6) migration -- domestic and international, and (7) economic factors -- industrialization, periodic recessions, and spiraling inflation" (p. 40). Some of these factors have reciprocal effects on each other. External factors can be seen as outside the control of African American males and as significant aspects of the context of their everyday experiences.

Internal factors can be viewed from the individual, family, or community level, but they are differentiated from external factors in that the actions of individuals can contribute to these factors occurring in their own lives. A holistic view of African American males takes into account the complex interactions of external and internal factors as one tries to understand them.

African American male inmates are a subset of African American males whom we should view holistically. How we view inmates is complicated by our sense that they themselves may have been victims and at the same time they should be held responsible for their actions. Many inmates have received a poor education, have histories of having been abused as children, or are mentally ill. Yet, they perpetrated a crime against another. If we cling to a view of them as victims, we fail to note the action for which they should be held accountable; conversely, if we view them as perpetrators, we fail to see the antecedents that led to their crimes. Viewing them holistically opens the possibilities for seeing the infinite complexity of their lives.

Methodology

This research study is interpretive and uses phenomenological methodology. In order to grasp and portray the African American male inmates' reality, it was essential that I, the researcher, and the inmates have some shared experiences. According to Srinivasan (1989) "the act of interpretative research envisages an elusive yet powerful link between the precategorical reality of the researcher and of the respondent regarding the topic of research on hand" (p. 68). My lived experience as an African American woman and as a mother, daughter, sister, aunt, friend and cousin

of African American males and my knowledge of theory intermingles with the educational experiences of African American male inmates in a potentially forceful way.

Interviews were the means by which I obtained accounts of the coinvestigators' schooling experiences. (In this study, the participants are referred to as coinvestigators). Face to face, individual interviews were selected for this study because this approach is well suited to phenomenological research. Phenomenological interviews are conversational and the participants are involved in an interpersonal engagement (Polkinghorne, 1993) with the interviewer. Indepth interviews also provide each coinvestigator the freedom and flexibility to tell their stories in their own words (Anderson & Jack, 1991).

The second process in the phenomenological inquiry is reducing the themes. According to Van Manen (1990), "Theme analysis refers to the process of recovering the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meaning and imagery of the work" (p. 78). The themes of the coinvestigators' stories are the structures of their experience. I read the text created from the first three coinvestigators who were released early in the study and from the first round of interviewing the other coinvestigators. The second round of interviews probed these topics. Text from all the interviews were reread and reviewed. Some of the topics were redundant and were combined with other topics or became subtopics. The four themes that were selected appeared consistently throughout my review of the grouped topics. Ultimately, the themes were determined by separating those that were not essential (Lanigan, 1979).

Finally, I considered the four themes, pondering their interrelationships. The intent was to determine how the themes connected and to identify a central theme that illustrates the connections. The latter is intended to "conjoin related concepts and ideas" (Orbe, 1993). The coming together of themes marks a turning point in conducting phenomenological research. For me this was a thematic connection; it indicated a central, interrelationship among themes. Prior to the thematic connection, the mere words in the transcripts were disparate and lacked significance.

African American Male Inmates' Lived Experiences With Schools

Themes

The research question which framed this project was: What are the school experiences of African American male inmates like? The essential themes give a partial answer to this question. One main over arching theme was disclosed in the text. I read and pondered the themes for a central idea (Orbe, 1993). The idea was to represent the essence of how the coinvestigators experienced their schooling. The primary theme embedded in all the schooling experiences they related seemed to be: "It just couldn't have been my school." This phrase was used by one coinvestigator as he sought to describe his experiences at a predominately Hispanic elementary school. The word just in "it just couldn't have been my school" lets us know the strength of his feeling about not belonging there. "Just" communicates his inability to describe further how he felt; "just" signifies finality.

The first theme is "we don't like to be embarrassed." Embarrassment in school decreases the school's purpose as a place of growth and development and diminishes one's sense of self. One can never truly feel a part of a school if he feel embarrassed there.

The second theme, "Feelin' like I'm on the outside peeping in," signifies that the school couldn't be one's own. If you're "on the outside peeping in" at the school, then you are not a part of the school. Being on the outside looking in makes two locations vivid: the location on the inside and the location where you are standing.

The third theme is "we want to be cared about." All students want and need to feel they are cared about at school. A normal response to feeling unwelcome is to leave, to retreat, to withdraw into oneself, or to feel that one is not wanted. School then becomes their school--not ours, not mine.

The fourth theme, "they were afraid of us and we were afraid of them," expresses the fear that they noticed others felt for them and reveals their own fear and mistrust. Both white and black teachers seemed to fear the coinvestigators and some teachers kept their distance from them. White students seemed edgy when two schools were integrated. The coinvestigators feared others who might act unpredictable because of their fear of them. As long as the coinvestigators were feared and were fearful, they could not be comfortable in the school. They could not be at home there. If one is fearful, then we see why he says, "It just couldn't have been my school."

The four themes woven together produced the central theme. These five themes represent the descriptions of the coinvestigators's lived educational experiences. The coinvestigator who was transferred from a black school to a Hispanic school captured the essence of the lived educational experiences of the coinvestigator in one of his comments. When attempting to describe how the two schools were different he said, "It is not so much as different, but I just knew that this couldn't have been my school. You know it just couldn't have been my school."

We Don't Like Being Embarrassed

The coinvestigators talked about being embarrassed as they described aspects of their educational experiences. Sometimes they were embarrassed by teachers and sometimes they felt embarrassed because they did not know what they seemingly should have learned. When teachers embarrassed them, the teachers would single them out and make a big deal about their predicament.

Some coinvestigators were clear they did not like to be embarrassed by teachers. One said, "I didn't like teachers who were strict and purposely embarrassed you. Sometimes it pushes you to do better, but sometimes you just gave up." The term "purposely" conveys that the teachers were fully aware of their actions. When teachers acted purposefully, they were seen as intentionally attempting to embarrass him. The effect on this coinvestigator was to discourage him; he "just gave up."

Sometimes teachers singled out students to embarrass them. Another coinvestigator said, "I did not like a teacher who always singled me out." Being "singled out" meant being selected from the group, distinguished from other students, picked on more often than other students by the teacher. Is being singled out about being under increased scrutiny? If one is "always" being singled out, is one being carefully selected because of an undesirable trait? If one comes to expect to being singled out, being in the classroom is changed, different for this student.

Not only were coinvestigators intentionally singled out for embarrassment, but ordinary--and unpleasant--bodily functions were the cause of embarrassment. Being sick and throwing up is embarrassing to children, but throwing up in class and having a teacher draw attention to it was worse. One coinvestigator said, "I threw up in the classroom. Mr. Casey made a big deal out of it. He went and got Mr. Bord [another teacher] and the janitor. It was very embarrassing for me. I went home and didn't come to school for two days."

Throwing up in the classroom causes public embarrassment because of the loss of control of the body and the stench that inevitably ensues. As he was dealing with this embarrassment, he was also embarrassed by the teacher making a big deal out of it. The teacher blew things out of proportion by doing and saying things unnecessarily. More adults were called to the classroom.

Miller (1996) defines embarrassment as a complex emotion which is made up of several components and aspects, the salience of which necessitates the individual making appraisals of a social event and the physiological and behavioral consequences of that event. In appraising the event, self-presentational difficulties and a concern with social rules are central issues. Embarrassment has to do with a failure to present a desired image to others whom we think will make some judgement about us. Miller continues to explain that embarrassment generally does not carry moral implications as does shame; it refers to accidents or goofs.

When we connect the experience of throwing up at school with Miller's definition of embarrassment, we see that it was an accident. The coinvestigator's illness prevented him from controlling his bodily functions and he vomited foul smelling liquids from his body. Therefore the experience of throwing up, especially at school, is an accident. Having friends is important for children, and the coinvestigator did not want his peers to judge him negatively. The coinvestigator was embarrassed because his image, to his friends, would be tarnished.

Another occurrence of embarrassment involved one coinvestigator getting dirty on the playground. Active boys are bound to get dirty in the course of their normal play. Indeed, can active boys play without getting dirty? According to one coinvestigator, "After playing outside, we would get punished for having dirty hands, and would have to stand at the back of the classroom. The other children would laugh and tease me. I would be hurt and embarrassed."

The memory of the other children laughing at and teasing him appeared to be echoing as he talked. He was reliving this unpleasant experience. Though usually confident, this coinvestigator displayed some physiological responses to embarrassment that included dropping his head, briefly frowning, and placing his hands over his chin, appearing as though he did not quite know what to do with them. I sensed that he was attempting to stay cool to maintain his image of a strong black man, even though he was hurting.

Also contributing to coinvestigators' embarrassment were learning disabilities and not knowing what they were expected to know in school. Not knowing the words of the pledge of allegiance to the American flag was devastating for one coinvestigator. He said, "In elementary school we would recite the pledge to the flag. I never got the words right. I didn't like that." His memory of the experience visibly bothered him. As he dropped his head, his facial expression appeared anguished. I felt his pain during this conversation, and I felt sorry for him. The image of him as a man in prison shifted to the little boy watching helplessly as everyone else recited the pledge comfortably. "It wasn't his fault," I thought.

He also spoke about being embarrassed because he constantly needed help from the teacher. He could not cope with the work. He continued, "It was difficult and embarrassing because I was always asking the teacher to come give me help. All of the other kids were just doing it on their own and stuff like that." According the him, he attempted to hide his embarrassment by acting out in class. He was a class clown and sometimes picked on the teachers as he tried to cope with the class work. For him, acting out became a facade to avoid embarrassment and to project an image that everything was all right with him. Goffman (1955) refers to this facade as a face saving strategy. In offering an explanation for his acting out, the coinvestigator told me,

> I didn't like school, so I tried to cover up for dealing with the problem of not reading and getting embarrassed. School did not appeal to me because I felt different from the other kids. I worried about doing the wrong thing, getting laughed at, and being embarrassed.

Covering up and hiding is associated with shame. Sometimes embarrassment and shame are used interchangeably, and sometimes shame is seen as an extension of embarrassment (Lynd, 1958; Miller, 1996). Shame was a deeper sense of embarrassment that was experienced by some of the coinvestigators.

When I asked the coinvestigator who was sent to the back of the classroom for having dirty hands what he would tell educators regarding what he felt, he remarked,

> I think that when you try to point out something bad about a person, I think that as a human being we don't like to hear anything bad about ourselves. That sort of insults the person or makes him feel shame, and some of us react different ways when we feel shame.

We learn that for this coinvestigator, shame produced some sort of "different" reaction for him. Could this different reaction have been acting out? We also learned that his shame was caused by being told something bad about himself.

Although they spoke in terms of embarrassment most of the time, I detected shame in the coinvestigator who stayed home for two days after throwing up and the coinvestigator who could not recite the pledge of allegiance to the American flag. Understanding these lived experiences can be enhanced by an awareness of three main points about shame: how shame is defined, how it is associated with other terms, and the impact of shame.

Shame is an emotion caused by embarrassment, unworthiness, or disgrace (American Heritage College Dictionary, 1993). Shame is overwhelming. Feelings of shame may lead to feelings of inferiority. Shame may be synonymous with embarrassment (Lynd, 1958; Miller, 1996), but shame hurts more deeply. Shame affects the psyche. We may avoid acknowledging shame--its hard to say out loud, "I feel ashamed of myself." It's painful.

Children associate shame with embarrassment, ridicule, feeling stupid, and being incapable of doing things right (Ferguson, Stegge, and Damhuis, 1991). Feeling shame is also associated with not measuring up (Wong, 1992). Wong believes that males tend to make an effort to elude feelings of shame. This is particularly important to understand about African American males because their conceptions of manhood (Hunter and Davis, 1994) include dignity.

In Nigger, Dick Gregory (1964) shared his experiences with shame in school. His experiences in school bear a close resemblance with the coinvestigator who stayed home for two days. Gregory said, "I never learned hate at home, or shame. I had to go to school for that" (p. 43). His story represented a world of shame, of being soaked in shame. Being introduced to shame heightened the awareness of shame in all other aspects of his life. Shame was about feeling different, and suddenly that difference was seen everywhere. He wrote,

> I had almost three dollars in dimes and quarters in my pocket. I stuck my hand in my pocket and held onto the money, waiting for her to call my name. But the teacher closed her book after she called everybody else in the class. I stood up and raised my hand. "What is it now?" You forgot me. She turned toward the blackboard. "I don't have time to be playing with you, Richard." "My Daddy said he'd . . ." "Sit down, Richard, you're disturbing the class." "My Daddy said he'd give . . . fifteen dollars." She turned around and looked mad. "We are collecting this money for you and your kind, Richard Gregory. If your Daddy can give fifteen dollars you have no business

> being on relief." "I got it right now, I got it right now, my Daddy gave it to me to turn in today, my Daddy said . . . " "And furthermore," she said, looking right at me, her nostrils getting big and her lips getting thin and her eyes opening wide. "We know you don't have a Daddy." (p. 45)

Gregory's teacher made sure that everyone knew that he was on welfare and that he didn't have a daddy. Her shaming him publicly in front of the class was a turning point.

> And I always thought the teacher kind of liked me. She always picked me to wash the blackboard on Friday, after school. That was a big thrill, it made me feel important. If I didn't wash it, come Monday the school might not function right. I walked out of school that day, and for a long time I didn't go back very often. There was shame there. (p. 45)

We see these African American males--Dick Gregory and the coinvestigator–being shamed at school and their subsequent avoidance of school because of it. The significance of their experiences is that the place which was to provide learning, hope, guidance, and better opportunities is the place they fled. Perhaps they were hiding from individuals who witnessed their shame. The impact of shame lingers in the memories of these adults.

Feelin' Like I'm on the Outside Peeping in

The testimonies from the coinvestigators revealed that they felt very little involvement in their educational experiences, like they were outsiders. These feelings were based on several episodes. One coinvestigator's family moved frequently and thus, he was a new student several times. Another coinvestigator had a low reading level and felt that he was a burden on the teachers. Two other coinvestigators felt that they were in somebody else's school, and another felt that the teachers distanced themselves in the classroom. The theme, "feeling like I'm on the outside peeping in" informs us of the coinvestigators' concerns about male bonding, being on the outside, and their being in a different world. Regardless of the specific episode, they felt like outsiders at school.

Male Bonding

For some of the coinvestigators, not feeling connected to their school increased the need for bonding with other African American males. They were thrust into the arms of those with whom they could connect. When asked how he would get to know other students or make himself feel part of the school, one coinvestigator said that to get to know each other, the boys would play fight during recess. He believed that sometimes the teachers must have thought that they hated each other, but according to

him, that was something little boys do: play rough. "We would be bonding. Wrestling, clocking, everything was going on out there in that school yard." Clocking is a jumbled combination of karate and fighting. Playing and bonding were a part of his way of being in the world. The concept of male bonding through play is also illustrated by Charles Ogletree's experiences at Harvard University. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1994) writes,

> The Black Plague--a black law school students' 'rough touch' football team--offered much more than a workout. 'There was a strong sense of kinship. . . It was a source of identity. . . an inner circle of strength. . . important male bonding.' Alone, each of the brothers felt isolated and vulnerable; together they felt invincible. (p. 640-641)

Another coinvestigator told about bonding taking place during recess. He said, "As a new student, I would mainly try to build relationships during recess. That is where the bond come in as far as everyone knowing each other." Bonding through play at recess helped him to connect with a few other students. Because he felt like an outsider in the school, the only connection he felt came from getting to know others through play. Recess was vital to the bonding because only then were the boys free to be together and to wrestle, clock, and "rough touch." They seized the opportunity to connect to with other.

This coinvestigator frequently used the phrase "keeping it real" which refers to the importance of maintaining a strong African American identity which may carry different meanings according to one's socioeconomic status or belief system. The phrase can refer to staying African American in a predominately white context. The coinvestigator did not feel connected to the school and even the African American teachers because they were not real in his opinion; they acted fake, not like themselves. African Americans have various phrases to describe how one should be one's self. The phrase, "putting on airs," refers to a pretense, such as switching ways of speaking or acting in the presence of someone else. Another phrase, "stay black," carries the same meaning as "keeping it real." The coinvestigator who introduced the phrase in our conversation, felt strongly that neither the African American teachers in his school nor the African American inmates and employees at the correctional facility were keeping it real. When teachers and students at school did not keep it real, he had difficulty connecting with his school.

Being on the Outside

Relying on conventional wisdom, one would expect that participating in school activities would be one way to increase feelings of connection to a school. But for one coinvestigator, it did not help. According to him, "I did not feel any connection at school even though I participated in band."

Another coinvestigator believed that he had no involvement in making decisions about the courses he should take while he was in high school. He said,

> They [teachers] should ask what is it that you want, as opposed to somebody making decisions behind closed doors. You've got to include these people and integrate what they want in order to have them to want to come to school. They just told me this is the class and here it is.

Not being included in the selection of his coursework excluded him from school in some ways. He sensed no school ownership and, hence, he was an outsider.

In I've Known Rivers, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1994) writes about Orlando Bagwell as he painfully watched his friends and himself become estranged from education by the lack of choices. Bagwell said

> This feels alien, frightening . . . . You walk into class and you are not on your territory. They decide what you should learn and how you should do it . . . . You feel excluded from those decisions, rendered inadequate. (p. 557)

One coinvestigator said attending a predominately white school made him feel like an outsider:

> I was for the most part educated in Detroit and Minnesota. Ah, Detroit was an environment where there were many more African American kids. When we came to Minnesota that was quite different. Back in the sixties, I don't think that the big migration of numbers came, black people came until the late seventies or early eighties. Back in those days, the class rooms were predominately European or Caucasian. There were maybe like three African Americans, and we felt like it was them and us. Certain things that--for example, if I had a confrontation with one of the white kids. I could be right, my perspective or my argument could be more right . . . they would take sides. You have this majority number who took sides against the minority. And you felt like no matter what my opinion is, I'm not gonna be heard today. And they would begin to create barriers.

When asked what those barriers were, he responded:

> They would be like ah, just like silent bars. You know what I mean? Invisible bars, silent barriers. No matter what you would do, you wouldn't fit in there. No matter how hard

you try, you're not with us and we're not with you--therefore ain't nothing happin' here. You would feel alienated.

Like Dick Gregory (1964) who left school after he was shamed, and the coinvestigator who left school after he was embarrassed, we see two more African American males describing experiences which distanced them from school. One is a coinvestigator in this study, the other a successful film maker. Both the coinvestigator and Bagwell used the word alienated to describe a particular aspect of their educational experience. When one feels alienated, one is isolated, alone, not attached. Like the coinvestigator who was isolated from the rest of the class for having dirty hands, Bagwell felt distanced and removed. He said, "What hurt more than the outbursts of violence was the chronic feeling of being 'on the outside,' excluded and distanced from 'the center of things" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994, p. 524). Lawrence-Lightfoot continued quoting Bagwell, "I was the only black kid in the second grade. I went through the whole year barely talking to anyone, fearful and uncomfortable" (p. 522). As noted above, one of the coinvestigators used the phrase, "You wouldn't fit in, no matter how hard you try." We can see that he spent time and effort attempting to gain access.

Another coinvestigator felt different from other students because his reading level was very low and he could not comprehend as quickly as the others. He said,

> You just feel like you different from everybody else, you just <u>different</u> from them because it's like they got these skills and qualities and stuff and you don't got em. It's like you just don't fit in. There is somewhere where I fit it. I'm just gonna find out where I fit it and instead of just saying I'm go' try to fit in, I just gotta ask them [teachers] for the help and let them know what I need. And if they willing to give me that, I can try to fit it right here. I would usually try to find something easy.

I asked, "What would that be like? Where would you fit in? He said, "Most likely with the guys that were skipping class, or go out to the mall or something, hang like that."

As an outsider, a great deal of time is spent attempting to gain access. As one attempts to gain access, feelings of rejection are supreme, because in the process, the self is lost (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994). Feeling like an outsider in school was evident when the coinvestigator spoke about sensing that their school was someone else's territory, being one of few African Americans in school, being considered as the bad guy, and being aware that you can't learn like others.

It Was a Different World

One coinvestigator attended a predominantly black high school, called East High School, near his home until it was closed as a part of the desegregation of schools in his city. The students at East High School were separated and sent to two suburban, all white schools miles away from their neighborhood. He smiled as he talked, but he appeared to have a great deal of resentment toward the district for closing his school and sending him to a different world. This transfer was not only a significant change in schooling for him, but also a critical change (Polite, 1994) in the make up of his new school, Bilford High School. The racial composition of Bilford was dramatically affected by busing this coinvestigator and his friends out there. He did not feel connected to the school because he believed that the teachers and students in his new school did not want the black students to be a part of it. When asked what could have helped him to feel connected, he frowned as he said, "Nothing would have helped. I couldn't stand that school!" He continued, "I didn't like most of the teachers because they seemed uppity like they were better than me. Their attitude was arrogant. The whole school was." I asked him what the teachers did to appear arrogant or uppity. He said,

> It's just the way they used to talk and say things. Their vocabulary was different from the teachers at East. The teachers at East would sit down and talk to you on the same level that you were at. At Bilford they would use these big ole vocabulary words and say stuff like, 'Mr. Low, you are so and so and so.' Sometimes it made me feel awkward, but most of the times I wasn't trying to hear what they were saying.

I asked him how teachers at East talked to him. He said, "Teachers at East were saying, 'You need to shape up or ship out.' They were direct." The difference in the way black and white teachers communicate with students, is an example of culturally influenced oral interactions (Delpit, 1988). Many African American teachers and parents pose explicit directives such as you need to shape up or ship out. According to Delpit (1988), white teachers are more likely to give "veiled directives," which may be more difficult to interpret.

Yearnings for a more welcoming environment was felt by the coinvestigator who was transferred to Bilford. He experienced a great loss of the bond with others in the close-knit relationships in his former school. He left an environment that was welcoming and entered Bilford High School which was cold and distant. When describing the teachers at East High, he said, "The teachers related better to you because the teachers lived in the same neighborhood with you. Bilford was way out surrounded by suburbs and

big ole houses and things like that." In his new school, teachers were more formal. According to Bowser (1991) there is a need to drop the formality with some students and take a personal interest in their lives and work with them. He believes that an effective and motivating relationship begins when that happens.

Looking back, this 23-year-old coinvestigator reflected on the great differences between his neighborhood and that surrounding his new school. Being forced to integrate into a new school brought about a new level of awareness about differences between black people and white people. He said,

> The white kids had benzes [Mercedes] and everything in school. The school district separated our school in halves. We were torn up. This was very different. I used to say every time I was going to school "these white people getting paid." I think that's when I first started seeing a difference between our neighborhood and their neighborhood. I got a good look at it then. I think that's when I knew there was racism, but going to Bilford set it off.

The coinvestigator's described two schools which reflected two cultures. There are two points to be noted here. First, most African Americans see a contradiction between the way they are treated and Caucasians' belief in justice and equality. Even Myrdal (1944) found that the nation's beliefs in justice and equality was a direct contradiction to the way white people treated African Americans. The second point is made by Hacker (1992). He discusses the black and the white world in America in Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal; he states that blacks and whites see things differently and they are treated differently. The coinvestigator who was bused to the suburban school became aware of the two worlds through his own lived experiences. Awareness of the two worlds increased his awareness of differences, of feeling different, of feeling like an outsider at school.

In Native Son (1940), the character Bigger experienced being an outsider too. Like the coinvestigator on the school bus, Bigger also knew that there were differences between himself and white people. He said,

> Them white boys sure can fly, Gus said. Yeah, Bigger said, wistfully. They get a chance to do everything . . . . I could fly one of them things if I had a chance, Bigger mumbled reflectively, as though talking to himself . . . . I could fly a plane if I had a chance, Bigger said. If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you got to that aviation school, you could fly a plane, Gus said. For a moment Bigger contemplated all the 'ifs' that Gus had mentioned. Then both boys broke into hard laughter, looking at each other through squinted eyes. When their laughter subsided, Bigger said in a voice that was half-question and half-statement: It's funny how the white folks treat us, ain't it? . . . We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't.

They do things and we can't. It' just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a know-hole in the fence. . . (p. 14-17).

We can understand Bigger's recognition of the differences between blacks and whites. Likewise, we can visualize the coinvestigator riding on the school bus, peeping through the window, feeling like he was in a different world while noticing the large houses and expensive cars en route to school. As Bigger analyzed the differences, he said that he felt like he was in jail. Is this how the coinvestigator felt as he was bused to the new school and as he noticed the "big ole' houses" and teenagers driving "benzes?" Like Bigger, did he feel a sense of confinement? If so, is this how school should feel?

The school experiences of African American male inmates, disclose a "feelin like I'm on the outside peeping in." The testimonies from the coinvestigators informed us that they felt very little involvement in their educational experiences. We learned about male bonding--how it is manifested in rough play and why it is important to African American males. In spite of their efforts to bond with each other, they remained on the outside. We saw young African American males who felt like school was a different world. They felt like outsiders when they didn't relate culturally to their schools or when they fell behind academically. One coinvestigator felt like an outsider because even African American teachers were not keeping it real. The coinvestigators felt like they were on the outside peeping into someone else's school.

We Want to be Cared About

When the coinvestigators were asked to describe the teachers that they did or did not like and specific situations that made them feel good in school, caring emerged as a theme. We see in their experiences some of the teachers were caring. Caring teachers were described as those who provided guidance, who disciplined with concern, who had high expectations of them, were attentive to them, were patient with them, were nice and supportive, and who provided praise.

We also see in their experiences that some teachers really did not care. Uncaring teachers embarrassed them, did not provide positive comments, offered no support, allowed them to sleep in class, or only cared about them because of their athletic ability. Finally, uncaring teachers were also those who pushed them through classes because they were disciplinary problems, and who used corporal punishment. Caring represents a significant theme since students' self-esteem and self-worth are

influenced by teacher interactions (Deiro, 1994). Students may believe that teachers are uncaring when they intentionally embarrass them (Martin, 1987). Effective teachers are aware of the importance of caring, and reflecting on caring can alter a teacher's pedagogy (Webb & Blond, 1995).

Some of the Teachers Were Caring

In their article, Youth and Caring, Chaskin and Rauner (1995) reported on youth programs that focused on caring. One such program, the Research Program on Youth and Caring, developed the following definition. They wrote that caring,

> Involves the ways in which individuals and institutions protect young people and invest in their ongoing development. It also involves the ways in which young people, in turn, protect the rights and interest of others and ultimately support the ongoing development of their social and civic communities. (p. 671-672)

In another definition of caring, Bosworth (1995) reported that as teens discussed characteristics of caring, they saw caring as "an integral part of relationships within their circle of intimate friends and family members, as well as in their school, their community, and the rest of the world" (p. 687). Noblit, Rogers, and McCadden's (1995) conceptualize it as a value. They wrote, "Caring is a value. Morally and culturally, caring is a belief about how we should view and interact with others" (p. 680). Most significantly, caring means that we help others grow and reach their full potential, according to Mayeroff, (1971). Mayeroff further contends that the major ingredients of caring include: knowing, patience, honesty, trust, humility, hope, and courage. These ingredients were evident in the voices of the coinvestigators when they discussed the extent to which teachers cared about them.

The coinvestigators gave many examples of guidance they received from teachers, and in the guidance we see teachers who cared for them. One coinvestigator with a history of severe truancy was eventually sent to a training school for boys where he found educational guidance. According to him, "The teachers at the training school were more caring, fun, and creative than they were in the public schools. The coach really pushed me." Another coinvestigator remarked, "Mr. Pointer dressed sharp like we did. He would make learning applicable to life, to what we were experiencing. He made us understand why we wanted to stay in school."

Most of the coinvestigators indicated that they appreciated discipline, care, and guidance from their teachers. One coinvestigator said, "they didn't just report bad things, but used discipline and care toward me. They visited my home regularly and laughed with my mom." Another coinvestigator

commented on the guidance he received from a teacher who extended himself to help him: "One teacher, a man, tried to help out by building a relationship with my family. He pushed me to do what was right." Another coinvestigator admired his principal's respect and guidance. He said, "My elementary school principal was like Ida B. Wells - strong, respected, classy. She took some classes to Washington, D.C. She taught us how to use silverware properly."

Following a fight in high school, a coinvestigator's high school principal guided him to put his energy into sports instead of expelling him. He said,

> My first fight in high school changed my life because instead of suspending or expelling me, the principal encouraged me to put that energy in sports. I started running track, my grades were good, and I graduated from there. I had no additional fights.

Another way guidance was experienced was through teachers helping them to set goals which is an important aspect of academic achievement and life success. The coinvestigator believed that by helping them to set goals, teachers demonstrated belief in them and in their ability to succeed. According to one coinvestigator, "I liked teachers who were always trying to get you to plan a career."

When asked to uncover his most pleasant memory of school, one coinvestigator smiled as he recalled the praise one teacher gave him about his class project:

> He [teacher] was talking about Africa one day. He referred to it as the dark continent. Not because of the color of the people, but because little was known about it. And I said I know plenty about it. And he said, 'All right, go for what you know.' So, he assigned us term projects . . . when I got done, I was so proud. I took it to class and showed it . . . When I finished it, the class gave me an applause. My teacher liked it so much, he kept it and showed it to other teachers and classes.

The coinvestigator told about many incidents of teachers caring for them. However, not all of their teachers cared.

Some Teachers Really Didn't Care

The coinvestigators felt many of their teachers really did not care about them. The teachers' lack of care was disclosed in their lack of positive comments to the students, by pushing them through the grades even though they were not learning, and in their corporal punishment of the students. We note that not caring meant omission of providing what students needed as well as commission of school sanctioned violence against them.

When asked to describe his teachers, one coinvestigator said, "I think my attitude was like they really don't care. They are just here to collect their paycheck every two weeks or what not."

Dick Gregory imagined a caring teacher which contrasts with the uncaring teacher he experienced in everyday life. By noting the caring teacher of his imagination, we better understand what a teacher who does not care is like. We do not see evidence of positive comments in Dick Gregory's (1964) poignant story of a schoolteacher he conceived in his imagination:

> I made up a schoolteacher that loved me, that taught me to read. A teacher that didn't put me in the idiot's seat or talk about you and your kind. She didn't yell at me when I came to school with my homework all wrinkled and damp. She understood when I told her it was too cold to study in the kitchen so I did my homework under the covers with a flashlight. Then I fell asleep. And one of the other five kids in bed must have peed on it. (p. 21-22)

Another coinvestigator, told about a teacher who did not provide positive comments which was important to him. He said, "For me, positive comments did not come from most teachers. That was abusive. Anytime an adult says something positive, it can enhance a child's ability." Positive comments coming from teachers is a crucial aspect of academic achievement, and the lack of positive comments was viewed as uncaring and unsupporting by these men. When they were young students, they wanted to hear positive comments. Too often, their teachers were silent; they failed to speak words of encouragement which made them seem not to care.

The lack of care was also demonstrated by teachers allowing them to sleep. One coinvestigator revealed that he would sometimes sleep in class and he noted that the teachers did not say anything. He had a vivid memory of how that made him feel.

> They don't mind as long as I'm in the classroom and not bothering anybody. That's pretty much how it was. When I wouldn't show up for class, they would call home, but when I did show up for class, I was just back there sleeping.

When I asked him how it made him feel for teachers to leave him alone while he slept, he stated,

> I think it gave me more encouragement to give up. I said to myself, "Well see, they don't care so why should I care?" Instead of thinking about this is something I need, so I should care and try to ask them for the help that I need.

During these conversations, one coinvestigator said he believed that teachers were only interested in receiving a paycheck. Another believed that the lack of positive comments from teachers were abusive and another indicated that teachers allowed him to sleep in class. These

actions by the teachers demonstrated to the coinvestigator that they did not care. But, there were other reasons coinvestigators gave for believing teachers did not care about them. Coinvestigators in this study were pushed through school without learning much of the intended curriculum.

Being pushed through school meant that one coinvestigator had not done the schoolwork, but teachers promoted him. Although he was eventually sent to a reform school for boys and admitted that he was always in trouble in school, he strongly believed that he was promoted because he was bad.

> I don't see how I was passing. I must have been doing the work. But, I just really don't remember doing enough to pass. I always passed and I've never got left back, but I just don't see how I was passing. Because, I never really felt as though they were teaching me anything.

As he spoke to me, I noticed that his facial expression changed to reveal frustration and concern.

> In elementary school, I was always getting suspended. I just felt as though I was a real bad kid, but I was always passing. I never got left back. That's what kind of surprised me. If I was so bad and I wasn't doing the work why didn't I never get left back? Then I started figuring that I was just so bad that they were letting me pass to get me out of their class.

Another indicated that he attended school, but was not engaged in classroom discussions. He also sold drugs and played sports his senior year. He said teachers "pushed me through because I was an all-star athlete. They did not press the issue about my work and stuff. At the time, I thought it was cool."

These comments inform us that they were aware that they were being pushed through for reasons other than academic achievement. Although their teachers may have felt sorry for them or made allowances for the athlete's hectic schedule, the teacher's passivity was seen as uncaring. The experience of being pushed through discloses uncaring teachers.

Coinvestigators described caring teachers as attentive, patient, encouraging and as providing praise and guidance to them. Uncaring teachers did not provide positive comments, allowed them to sleep in class, pushed them through because of their behavior or their athletic ability, or inflicted physical punishment upon them.

They Were Afraid Of Us and We Were Afraid Of Them

Using mirrors as a metaphor can help us understand the theme, "they were afraid of us and we were afraid of them." Two mirrors facing each other bounce an image back and forth. Fear in school was like that for the coinvestigators. They believed that teachers and students were afraid of them, and the coinvestigators were afraid of the teachers.

Fear was sometimes used instrumentally by coinvestigators. One coinvestigator used fear to deflect attention away from his academic deficiencies. He stated:

> In my early childhood I was like ah, the bully of the classroom. I would pick on people to try to get their attention. They were scared. That was a long time ago. . . . My biggest fear was worrying about what everybody would think of me when they knew that I couldn't read or spell. That was my biggest fear. I tried to hide that as much as I could by doing something else. Getting on someone else, getting something stirred up.

Two fears are evident here. The coinvestigator was afraid of being devalued so he made other people afraid of him.

In the following passages, we see the reflection of teachers who felt fearful from their interactions with African American males. On the other side, we see the reflection of African American males who felt fearful.

Teachers Were Afraid of Us

The coinvestigators who had been students at predominately white schools were aware that some teachers who maintained greater distance from them were afraid of them. But fearful teachers were not limited to the predominately white schools. One coinvestigator reported a teacher in a predominately black school feared him:

> As I look back, I saw a fear from the teachers, as though they were saying, "I wonder if this fool will try to do something to me as I am writing on the board. If I get too close to him, will he try to rip me off or try to do something to me." That fear was like a protection against people. Even though they were nice, they tried to keep you at a certain distance. I can remember their fear. This is how I perceived them as I look back.

Fear in the classroom diminishes the possibilities for constructive student-teacher relationships, and it may result in varying outcomes. Poor student-teacher relationships, for example,

negatively affect self-concept (Testeman, 1996). The awareness that someone is afraid of you can stimulate fear in yourself because of the uncertainty of the other persons' actions.

According to one coinvestigator, the teachers' fear resulted in his leaving school. He said,

> A lot of times I think that they were afraid of me. Most of the time when I would get to acting up they would tell me to leave the class, and that is what I wanted to do in the first place. I wanted to have a reason, well they told me to leave, so I left.

He seemed to know how to manipulate the teacher's fear of him to escape from school.

We Were Afraid of Some of the Teachers

According to one coinvestigator, "The teachers at the white school were scary." He indicated that he tried to look tough and not be affected by them, but that he was also afraid. When asked why he was afraid of them, he was unable to describe it. Because he knew that they were afraid of him, he was afraid of what they would do to him. He seemed to sense the teachers' fear which in turn made him fearful.

Pre-existing conditions fomented fear among white teachers and students and African American students when two schools were desegregated. One coinvestigator talked about the fear he noticed on his first day at the predominately white school. He said,

> When we first got there, everybody was real edgy and scary looking. White dudes, they were leaving school early and white girls leaving with them, teachers acting all shaky and stuff like that. They were afraid of us. It was predominately white before East [the high school attended previously] closed.

He explained,

> We added fuel to the fire. Just acting up, gang banging, talking loud, pushing and shoving, slapping white boys in the back of their head. Dudes starting gambling with white dudes and taking their money. Brothers got to dating white girls. It was messed up. We just came to the conclusion that they were not used to blacks at their school. We were not used to white people. We had some white students there (East High School), but they were cool. The white students at Bilford would call us nigger sometimes.

Fear is an emotion that impacts various aspects of our lives. For example, Overstreet (1951) believed that racial and religious prejudice is sometimes expressed through fear. The impact of the burden of having others fear oneself has been widely experienced by African American males, but

has not been studied to great extent. We know little about how the burden of fear impacts academic achievement and the mental and emotional stability of African American male children.

Stereotypes about African American males may be responsible for many of the existing fears regarding them. However, as we learned from the coinvestigators in this study, fear is contagious. Like images in opposing mirrors, fear reflects or bounces off one person to another. Fear then become a continuing spiral.

"Don't Do's" For Educators

Don't	
. . . Forget that voice is important	African American males can teach us much about their own experiences and beliefs. But, we must be willing to listen to their voices. In Holler If You Hear Me, Michie (1999) informs us of the importance of student's voices.
. . . Maintain low expectations	Day-to-day, African American males contend with challenging conditions at school, experience racism and are viewed as inferior, worthless and dangerous. School experiences should not include these experiences. All children can learn and they should be told that "you" believe in them.
. . . Single students out or purposely embarrass them	Remember, if one comes to expect being singled out, being in the classroom is changed, different for this student.
. . . Exclude students from decision-making opportunities	Decisions about students' lives (course selection) should be made in conjunction with them. They are more likely to cooperate if they understand that their opinions matter.
. . . Forget the tendency of students to feel like outsiders	There is a positive correlation between school belonging and motivation (Goodenow, 1993). Having a sense of community and belonging is important for all students (Perry, 1996).
. . . Show impatience	Students are aware when you really don't want to work with them. Remember, caring teachers are those who demonstrated patience with them.
. . . Social promote because of disciplinary problems	In the long run, students associate social promotion with a lack of care. Let them know that you believe in their potential to do better and that you will not tolerate class disruptions.
. . . Forget to help them set goals	Helping them to set goals demonstrate your care and concern about their future and their ability to contribute much to society.
. . . Allow sleeping in class	To students, this demonstrates a lack of caring.
. . . Forget that the school belongs to the students	If students are made to feel unwanted, they feel they are on the outside of the school. When students feel on the outside, neither the school property nor others in the school are important to them. Everything on the inside becomes something or someone to work against as it works against outsiders.

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EFF-088 (Rev. 2/2000)